L.A. Galerie Lothar Albrecht presents:

Ken Lum

“Rorschach Shopkeeper Works”

October 26 to December 31, 2007

You and your friends are cordially invited to the opening on Friday, October 26 from 7 p.m.

This text is a summary of a review by Martina Koppe-Yang and an interview between her and Ken Lum in June 2007 at the occasion of his first exhibition in Beijing.

Based on his earlier Shopkeeper Series – signs in which a permanent half of a petit-bourgeois commercial sign is juxtaposed with a provisional message in temporary and movable lettering – Lum here references the identity-constituting “conflict between instrumentality and desire, as crystallized in the message and visual presence of the signs.”

Facing cultural and political assimilation, “the individual is confronted with his emotional functioning within the sign system of capitalist logic,” according to Lum. Considering this conflict part of the process of the individual’s emancipation and his quest for autonomy, the shop-sign itself becomes the symbol and scene of this process. By transforming the signs into the image of a psychoanalytic method, the artist subjects the sign itself to a psychoanalytic interrogation: its identity is defined as split, as evident in the visually disjunctive and mirrored structure. “Bonivino,” “Action Lock,” “Cambie Plumbing” or “Handy Appliance” become epitomes of self-encounter and self-definition.

The ambivalence of the quest for autonomy again becomes evident: Is it possible to frame one’s identity aside from dominant thought patterns and dis-
courses, is it possible that art defines itself aside
the logic of the market, or is, as Ken Lum asks,
“the quest for autonomy only an ideological de-
vice and maybe “anti-revolutionary in the sense
that it acts as a repository for avant-garde art as
one stage in the assimilative and acculturative
process of art into art history?”

Asked how he chose the signs he used for Ror-
schach Shopkeeper Works, Ken Lum answered:
“I like the effect of deferment in art such that
there can be a misrecognition, no matter how
temporary, in terms of the question of art and
non-art. In terms of the Rorschach works, I take
an already existing sign and I alter it such that

the effect of it being halved and reversed or
quartered creates a look in which the originating
parts are somehow defused of their purpose.
The signs are not necessarily split at the half-
way point, but at a point whereby a Rorschach
effect is maximized.”

And about differences to the earlier
“Shopkeeper Series,” he explained:
“The previous series were structured in two
parts, with one part permanent and the second
part provisional. The permanent part is the more
monolithic and declarative in terms of its an-
nouncement of the business and general busi-
ness information. The second part permits the entry
of voice, that of the imagined proprietor. I tried to
make the works such that the second part creates a
tension in combination with the first part; the second
part imparts the subjectivity of the proprietor which
may contravene the impersonal nature of business
and the quest of making money.”

Asked about the importance of identity in his works,
he replied:
“Identity is a recurring issue in my work, that is true.
It is a natural interest given my context, to which you
allude in your question. But beyond my own interest,
it is perhaps the central issue confronting many peo-
ple today, as identity gives people a sense of place
and being in the world. This is so, no matter that
identity is often a gnarled and changing term. I
think it is also a key and recurring issue in art, if
not the key issue. After all, what is art if it is not
about an expression of who we are as subjects
in the world?

Canada-based Ken Lum
has developed a large
and complex body of
work of great critical rele-
vance, including photog-
raphy, photographic por-
trait-logos, language paintings, and mirror works. His
œuvre focuses on the notion of identity, on its con-
struction, space and politics. Lum has participated in
many important international art exhibitions including
the Documenta XI (2002), the Shanghai Biennial
(2000), the Sydney Biennial, Carnegie International,
the Sao Paulo Biennial, the Venice Biennial and the
Johannesburg Biennial. He is also an active writer
and founding editor of Yishu: Journal of Contempo-
rary Chinese Art. He further curated major exhibi-
tions, both historical and contemporary: the 2004
NorthWest Annual exhibition held at the Center of
Contemporary Art in Seattle, Shanghai Modern:
1919 - 1945 for the Museum Villa Stuck in Munich,
co-curator of Sharjah Biennial 7, held in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, the Dubai Biennial.

Ken Lum’s œuvre as an artist and as a writer touches through its honesty and rigor. The artist eliminates the distance between life and art not only on an aesthetical, but also on an existential level. Similar to the Rorschach Shopkeeper Works, where the question of the self-definition of the individual is linked to the issues of autonomy and independence of thought pattern and systems, Lum connects the query for the relevance of art in contemporary society to his personal life.

In his speech at the 2006 Sydney Biennial he asked if there was not more to art. He defined the artist as a person who is in a “constant search for meaning,” who looks for that what “is missing,” and said that “there can be no progress (real, that is, moral) except in the individual and by the individual himself.”